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## "ATTENTION MUST BE PAID," CRIED THE BALLADEER: THE CONCEPT MUSICAL DEFINED

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### “ATTENTION MUST BE PAID,” CRIED THE BALLADEER: THE CONCEPT MUSICAL DEFINED

The concept musical, a fourth category of American musical theatre, has been accepted as a legitimate category but never fully defined. This study examined the attributes making up the category (theme, structure, character, and song), identified the hallmarks of the category, and provided a concise definition. Two concept musicals, Company and A Chorus Line were analyzed.

KEYWORDS: Musical theatre, Concept musical, Company,  
A Chorus Line, Musical theatre history

Christine Margaret Young

May 8, 2008

“ATTENTION MUST BE PAID,” CRIED THE BALLADEER:  
THE CONCEPT MUSICAL DEFINED

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THESIS

CHRISTINE MARGARET YOUNG

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

2008

“ATTENTION MUST BE PAID,” CRIED THE BALLADEER:  
THE CONCEPT MUSICAL DEFINED

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the  
College of Fine Arts  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Christine Margaret Young

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Rhoda-Gale Pollack, Professor of Theatre

Lexington, Kentucky

2008

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**“Attention Must Be Paid,” Cried the Balladeer:  
The Concept Musical Defined**

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

Musical theatre is a distinct dramatic genre recognized as a significant American creation. At its inception in the late nineteenth century, musical theatre was discounted by academics as a subject for scholarly consideration since it was considered a popular form of light entertainment. During the last three decades of the twentieth century, musical theatre has undergone an evolution, moving beyond the Golden Age of the integrated musical into new forms which highlight innovative trends. Richard Kislán, a leading musical theatre historian, asserts in his book The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theater (1995) that “alternative musical theatre practices emerged to threaten all the fundamental values of the creative musical theatre establishment” (153). As musical theatre matured as a genre, it became a vehicle for social commentary and experimentation in form. Through this experimentation, the concept musical was created as a fourth category of musical theatre joining its predecessors: the original musical comedy, the revue, and the integrated musical. As musical theatre has progressed from pure entertainment to “a reactionary phase of experimental redefinition,” the entire genre has become of interest to scholars (Kislán 5). As Scott McMillin in The Musical as Drama (2006) contends “The musical is the illegitimate drama, and now that the illegitimate has taken its place as a major American artistic accomplishment it deserves some theoretical thinking that holds true to its own history and form” (6).

Building a theoretical base for the study of musical theatre, is dependent on the consensus of scholars in their use of terminology when discussing the genre. McMillin addresses this need in his introduction to The Musical as Drama when he refers to musical theatre “as an aesthetic identity, a genre of drama with definable conventions around which one can think about the musical as a form of art” (x). Establishing criteria to study, discuss, and critique theatre is a process that has evolved slowly over the centuries. From Aristotle’s analysis of Greek theatre in Poetics to structural analysis of Shakespeare’s works to the study of contemporary twenty-first century theatre, the



scholarly examination of theatre as a field of study has grown as the terminology with which to discuss the innovations has developed. In that the genre of musical theatre is a relatively new dramatic form, it is critical to musical theatre study to define and to codify the elements of the genre.

Of the four categories of musical theatre, the concept musical is the least studied and understood but it holds the greatest potential for impact on the development of musical theatre scholarship. The concept musical is the most innovative category of musical theatre with subject matter and a structure similar in style to contemporary non-musical theatre. Analysis of this category could provide insight into the conventions of the entire musical theatre genre. Yet, the lack of agreement concerning what constitutes the concept musical category has made scholarly inquiry difficult. Martin Gottfried's early description of the concept musical as a musical ". . . based on a stage idea, not a story, but a look, a tone—what the show will be like as a stage animal" (Swain 270-1) was challenged by Swain who asserts "[b]y that definition, all the *Ziegfeld Follies* were concept musicals. . . ." (271) are only two of several dissenting views creating more confusion than clarity. In addition, the varying opinions concerning which musical was the first concept musical with Michael Kantor and Laurence Maslon citing Show Boat (399), Stephen Holden identifying Allegro (1), and Foster Hirsch naming Company (71) makes inquiry problematic. The current problems with conflicting definitions, confusion between the concept musical category and a director's concept, with no consensus concerning which musical was the first concept musical or even which musicals should be included in the category impedes scholarly discussion. Developing a comprehensive definition for the concept musical will make clear which musicals belong to the category resulting in the ability to create an accurate history allowing scholars to systematically analyze concept musicals.

Currently, scholarly opinions differ on the attributes comprising the concept musical with no consensus concerning how the elements of the musical make the category distinct. As a result, non-concept musicals such as Allegro (Citron 31) and Love Life (Mordden 152) have been placed in the category because of their innovative structure, creating confusion and impeding systematic analysis. The argument of this thesis is that defining the conventions of the concept musical will contribute significantly

to the continuation of musical theatre study by creating a reference point from which to discuss the concept musical. This thesis will seek to develop a clear classification for the concept musical category by (1) analyzing dissenting views of the definition, (2) consolidating the commonalities from the conflicting definitions into a comprehensive definition, (3) developing the classification based on the function of the attributes, and (4) applying the definition to two musicals scholars agree fall into the concept musical category: Company and A Chorus Line. In conclusion, the definition will then be applied to Pippin, Cats, and Avenue Q demonstrating the effectiveness of using the concept musical attributes for categorization.

## Chapter 2: Background for Study

Currently, musical theatre can be divided into four distinct categories: musical comedy, integrated musical, revue, and concept musical. The first three categories of American musical theatre have been firmly established with clear definitions addressing the attributes that make these musical theatre categories distinctive as outlined in Stanley Green's first chapter of The World of Musical Comedy. The attributes or primary components for determining categorization are built on the basic elements of the musical: plot, structure, character, and song. The absence or presence of these elements, degree of prominence and function contribute to the categorization of a musical. In addition, the attribute of theme further impacts the function of these elements. An examination of the three established categories will reveal how the identifiable attributes function in order to develop and test a clear definition for the concept musical.

### *Musical Comedy*

Musical comedy, popular during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first forty years of the twentieth century, is the earliest form of American musical theatre. Borrowing from European sources such as the extravaganza, musical comedy became distinctively American by embracing the native stage traditions of vaudeville, minstrelsy, and burlesque. According to Richard Kislán, in The Musical, one of the few works to discuss musical theatre forms rather than individual musicals, the term "musical comedy" was first applied to Evangeline (1874) by an unknown theatre critic (69). Unlike the majority of musical comedies which relied on interpolation (adding material to an existing work), Evangeline boasted an original score, a rarity when music was usually gathered from a variety of sources (Kislán 69). In the majority of early musical comedies, the "book, score, lyrics, dance, design, and performance served the star, the hit song, the quick laugh, and the favorite routine . . ." (Kislán 113). By providing a vehicle for star performers, musical comedy was used as a showcase, a place where writers and performers could entertain audiences with the best aspects of their talents. Focusing on talent instead of plot resulted in a musical prone to stopping its dramatic action while song and dance routines occurred. Stanley Green notes in his book, The World of

Musical Comedy (1984): “musical interludes were either forcibly inserted into dramatic sequences or performed between scenes” (1). Interpolation, while halting narrative flow, allowed songwriters the opportunity to have their songs performed by leading stars and also provided the stars the opportunity to perform their signature numbers. The combination of star performers and interpolation meant the script, or book, was only necessary to provide an excuse for song and dance routines. The result was a structure in which the story stopped for an unrelated song or dance routine, and there was not a consideration at all. Examples of musical comedy include Little Johnny Jones (1904), Lady, Be Good! (1924), and No, No, Nanette (1925).

### *Revue*

The American revue takes its name from the French version (Kislan 82), but like musical comedy, it incorporates a specifically American theatrical form, vaudeville, providing a distinctly native product (Green 2). The revue differs from its sources by utilizing “a single, unifying force organiz[ing] the variety of elements into a cumulative sequence of ascending theatrical peaks designed to service the concept of the show” (Kislan 82). Comprised of a series of songs and variety acts unified by an organizing theme, revues dispense with plot, but still contain a unifying element essential to the form. John Bush Jones in Our Musicals, Ourselves concisely defines the revue as “anthologies of separate and usually unrelated songs, dance numbers, and comedy routines” (2). Richard Kislan defines the revue with more depth:

Songs, dances, and scenes mounted within an evening’s context accrue layers of meaning, a feeling in performance unavailable when detached from material before and after. Context without the irreversible constraints of plot and character progression brings flexibility into the process of assembling a show. When a song doesn’t work in Act I, try it in Act II, or substitute another song, or replace it with a sketch, and so on. (83)

In this way, the revue remains a fluid form of entertainment, constrained by its organizing theme, but mutable based on audience reception of the acts.

The most famous revue was The Ziegfeld Follies, created by Florenz Ziegfeld and performed under his direction from 1907 until 1931. The “Follies” possessed a looser

thematic structure because of its primary focus on female beauty as opposed to revues such as Face the Music (1932) dealing with police and political corruption, or As Thousands Cheer (1933) drawing material from newspaper articles. Famous revues include: George White's Scandals (1911-1939), Irving Berlin's Music Box Revue (1921-1924), and Pins and Needles (1937). The latter revue satirizes the labor movement and was originally performed by members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Revues experienced a resurgence in the early 1990's, primarily as a way to showcase a composer's work. Recent revues include Andrew Lloyd Webber's The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber (1992), Maltby and Shire's Starting Here, Starting Now (1993), and Stephen Sondheim's Putting It Together (1993).

### *The Integrated Musical*

The third category is the integrated musical, often referred to as the book musical (Kantor 274). The forerunner of this category is Show Boat (1927) by Jerome Kern (274). Kern held the unique view (for his time) that "musical theater must be *theater*, an art form meant to be performed on a stage by actors who employ the elements of dramatic literature joined to song to reveal some aspect of human life" (Kislan 114). Unlike his contemporaries who wrote popular songs for inclusion in their musical comedies, Kern insisted that his music be informed by the book. For Kern, a failure of the book to engage the audience was also a failure of his musical composition (Kislan 115). In Show Boat, Kern and his lyricist, Oscar Hammerstein II, created a musical using song to drive the dramatic action and to address societal issues. Kern's innovations in Show Boat can be considered the first attempt at an integrated musical, yet its influence was not immediately felt in musical theatre writing (Kantor 115).

Until Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II began their collaboration in 1943, very few writers attempted synthesis of musical and book elements, although a few musicals, such as Pal Joey (1940) and Of Thee I Sing (1931), attempted a more unified form (Kislan 140). While Kern began to use music to advance the plot, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's II Oklahoma! (1943) completed the integration of dialogue, music, and dance (Kislan 197). They focused on a musical theatre where "acceptable motivation, projected psychological makeup, and down-to-earth humanity" were found in

their characters, and “comedy developed out of character and situation,” instead of being forcibly inserted into the action (Kislan 149). Focusing on music and dance that served the plot, Rodgers and Hammerstein eschewed showcasing specific performers.

In addition, Rodgers and Hammerstein believed each element of a musical should interlock to create a seamless whole promoting the book. Even though Jerome Kern attempted to integrate song and dance into the storyline of Show Boat, Kislan argues:

Integration implies more than synthesis, however, it implies the successfully coordinated ability of all elements of a musical show to push the story forward out of proportion to the individual weight of each element. Not only does every element fit perfectly into an integrated show, each functions dramatically to propel the book forward. (147)

While “synthesis” and “integration” both essentially mean the putting together of parts or elements so as to form a whole, Kislan chooses “integration” as the stronger term since it suggests a completeness achieved by bringing together the parts into a unified whole.

The distinction between synthesis and integration provides a delineating factor, a way to separate truly integrated musicals from their synthesized musical comedy counterparts.

Rodgers and Hammerstein achieved the full integration of musical elements, creating a new model for musical theatre writing. Other writers, such as Lerner and Lowe (Brigadoon 1947), Cole Porter (Kiss Me Kate 1948), and Frank Loesser (Guys and Dolls 1950), employed the innovations of using song and dance to continue the linear storyline, instead of allowing the musical numbers to interrupt and stop the story.

### *The Concept Musical*

What distinguishes the concept musical from the other categories? Over the last three decades, various definitions have been utilized by musical theatre scholars to discuss the concept musical. While the definitions do not explicitly agree with one another, they contain commonalities providing a basis for developing a cohesive definition. The focus on theme, use of a non-linear structure employing related situations instead of an overarching linear storyline, unique use of character, and self-commentary through song coalesce to distinguish the concept musical. The basic elements of the musical are distinctively arranged and utilized so that structure, theme, character, and song are the primary components that identify this category. Company (1970) and A

Chorus Line (1975) are two musicals that exemplify the concept musical category, revealing the specific attributes and their functions.

### Chapter 3: Conflicting Views of the Concept Musical

The continuing debate over the first concept musical and the proliferation of conflicting definitions inhibit the development of a clear classification for this musical theatre category. An examination of the use of “concept” as the term applied to musicals over the past three decades reveals the problem in clarifying the category, and sheds light on the attributes that designate this unique category of musical theatre.

#### *Origins of the Concept Musical*

The term “concept musical” did not appear in theatrical scholarship until after 1970, when the phrase “conceived by” preceded Michael Bennett’s name for A Chorus Line’s billing. It is not possible to verify who first used the phrase “concept musical.” John Bush Jones, in Our Musicals, Ourselves (2003), attempts to ascertain when the term first came into usage, and references the unknown origin: “Just when ‘concept’ and ‘musical’ were first linked is forever lost in the mist of theatrical myth” (270). He traces an early combination of the terms to a review by Martin Gottfried in 1968 (270). Although Gottfried refers to Zorba (1968), which is not considered a concept musical, he references Harold Prince’s “directorial concept” for the musical stating: “Conception is the big word here—it is what is coming to replace the idea of a ‘book’” (270). The review references an emerging trend in musical theatre at that time as writers began to experiment with the structure of the integrated musical. These innovations contributed to the continuing evolution of the musical theatre form. The emphasis on the idea of “conception” identifies a shift to alternative practices in musical theatre. As Jones states, this linkage of the words “concept” and “musical” is currently as close as scholarship has come to discovering the origination of the term.

With the introduction of the term “concept” when discussing musicals in the early 1970’s, confusion was created almost immediately because no distinction was made between the “production” or “directorial concept” and the concept musical. Establishing a distinction between a production or directorial concept and a concept musical is imperative in order to eradicate some of the confusion plaguing the concept musical category. Ostensibly, every play or musical produced should possess a



production/directorial concept. This concept impacts the staging and is the director's interpretation of the theme, idea, or issue at the center of the play that informs decisions concerning the look of the production, i.e. lighting, staging, costuming, and setting.

Richard Kislán addresses the distinction between a production concept and the concept musical:

On an elementary level, theme is to creation what concept is to interpretation. On the sophisticated level of the concept musical, concept is as central to creation and interpretation. Usually, concept enriches theme and gives the director and designers a handle on how to proceed. When theme dominates, however, no one quality can be more responsible for a show's universal appeal. (182)

To Kislán the production concept is an aspect of the musical that a particular director uses to inform a specific production. In this way, the production concept is usually placed onto an existing script, based on the director's choices. Kislán, in The Musical, introduces the understanding that the distinctive trait of the concept musical is found in the attributes of the musical that includes a dominant theme or unifying idea written into the structure by the composer, lyricist, and librettist. A director can provide reinforcement through performance or as demonstrated by Hal Prince with Company, work with the writers to originate the concept, but even without the director's vision, the musical's concept should be apparent to the audience. Therefore, the concept of the musical is built into the structure of the work by the writers (the librettist, composer, and lyricist) while a production concept illustrates the director's vision alone for a particular production.

### *The First Concept Musical*

In the 1970's when the term concept musical entered the musical theatre lexicon, it was employed primarily in connection with Company and A Chorus Line. Eventually, scholars began to apply the term retroactively to musicals from 1927 through the 1950's. In a review of the 1994 revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein's Allegro (1948) Stephen Holden, theatre critic for The New York Times, briefly discusses the musical's origins. He reflects:

“Allegro” was an aggressively innovative show. . . [and] some musical theatre historians credit “Allegro” with being the first “concept” musical, meaning a show, like Mr. Sondheim’s “Follies,” in which the theme is expressed in the staging as well as in the score. (Holden 1)

Holden’s cursory definition presupposes that Allegro fulfills the requirements of a concept musical because of its unusual employment of the songs that make up the musical part of the work. The chorus, unique for the 1940’s, acts as narrator and alternately represents townspeople and the main character’s super-ego/id, becoming almost as important as the primary characters.

Agreeing with Holden, Stephen Citron in Sondheim and Lloyd-Webber: The New Musical (2001), suggests the democratic, or equal sharing of solos between characters, use of song in Allegro allows more attention to be paid to the theme:

With no character standing out, none being given more than one song, one comes away with the “idea” that Joe’s particular story is secondary to the concept that success corrupts. Flawed though Allegro may have been, it opened the door to a splendid new way of writing for musical theater. Plot became secondary to philosophy. (41)

While Joe, the main character, and his wife are clearly important in the libretto of Allegro, the democratic assignment of songs (no more than one per character) was unusual in musical theatre writing during the 1940’s. As Joe makes decisions regarding his life the chorus provides commentary, warning him about poor choices and congratulating him when he makes the right decision. Citron also agrees with Holden that Allegro was “the first concept musical, or a show written around a theme” (41). Basing his assertion on the fact that “with no character standing out” the audience realizes that the story told “is secondary to the concept that success corrupts” (41).

In addition to Citron and Holden, Ethan Mordden in his book, One More Kiss (2001), proposes the idea that concept musicals were created in the 1940’s with Allegro (1948) and Love Life (1949), the first musicals to challenge “the musical’s strict sense of linear narrative” (152). While Allegro does use its chorus to interrupt the action, the “linear narrative” continues despite the choral commentary. Because Allegro represents a musical experiment conducted by Rodgers and Hammerstein, retrospectively placing Allegro in the concept musical category creates problems in understanding both the

individual musical and the category. A musical created in 1948 may share attributes with the concept musical which originated in the 1970's, but simply sharing attributes with the concept musical category cannot retroactively classify an integrated musical as a concept musical.

Citron's belief that Allegro "opened the door to a splendid new way of writing for musical theatre" is valid since it represents the first musical theatre piece attempting to ascribe the status equal to that of story. His discussion also reveals a relationship between Allegro to Company (41). Stephen Sondheim, a schoolmate of Oscar Hammerstein's son, found a mentor in the senior Hammerstein and worked as a production assistant on Allegro. Sondheim's work on Allegro provides a connection between it and Company through Hammerstein's mentorship. Categories of musical theatre do not develop in isolation, but are influenced by their predecessors. While not the first concept musical, Allegro was indeed a forerunner, just as Show Boat was a forerunner of the integrated musical.

Unlike Holden, Citron, and Mordden, Foster Hirsch in Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre (2005) cites Company as the first concept musical and credits Harold Prince and Stephen Sondheim with the category's creation. He dates the category's antecedents to the 1950/60's with George Abbot's productions of West Side Story (1957) and Fiddler on the Roof (1964) as opposed to the 1940's with Rodgers and Hammerstein's Allegro. Instead of focusing on Allegro and Sondheim's involvement with the musical, Hirsch believes that Prince's work with George Abbott:

. . . had a greater impact on the direction his own [Prince's] creative work would take. . . both [musicals] point toward the 'concept' musical by which Prince would earn his reputation. (Hirsch 34)

While West Side Story and Fiddler on the Roof do contain strong themes and utilize the book, music, and dance to support the themes, both remain excellent examples of the integrated musical, possessing linear storylines told through dialogue, song, and dance. Their accomplishment is the full integration of all elements.

Michael Kantor and Laurence Maslon in Broadway: The American Musical (2005) place the first concept musical in a decade other than the 1940's or 1970's. They address Prince's revival of Show Boat (1927, revival in 1997), asserting that "the

material was made for Harold Prince—it was the first concept musical” (Kantor 399). In musical theatre scholarship, Show Boat is usually considered the first attempt at an integrated musical as opposed to the first concept musical.<sup>1</sup> However, as Kislán states: “When Kern left Broadway, the royal line of succession passed to Rodgers and Hammerstein, and through Hammerstein to Sondheim. . .” (127). Hammerstein’s work with Kern and his subsequent mentorship of Sondheim reveals Show Boat’s legacy of innovation that led not only to the integrated musical, but also contributed to the development of other styles of musical theatre writing. While Show Boat is important to the development of musical theatre, like Allegro, it cannot be retroactively placed in the concept musical category.

Kantor and Maslon define the concept musical more in terms of Harold Prince’s directorial work instead of clearly defining the attributes of the category. At this point, it should be noted that musicals directed by Hal Prince are often discussed in terms related to the concept musical’s development as in Foster Hirsch’s Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre. Prince appears drawn to the concept musical and his directorial style does enhance the concept musicals he directs. However, Prince’s directorial concepts do not make each musical he directs a concept musical. While Prince has directed several musicals containing strong concepts (Cabaret 1966, Zorba 1968) in addition to concept musicals (Company 1970, Assassins 1990, Pacific Overtures 1976), other directors such as Michael Bennett in A Chorus Line, Jason Moore in Avenue Q (2003), and James Lapine in The 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee (2005), have also contributed to the category through their directorial style. Prince’s impact on the category of the concept musical is significant, and he can be considered the primary director who contributed to its creation since Moore and Lapine have only recently begun working within the category, although Lapine’s collaborations with Stephen Sondheim have influenced his writing and directing styles.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Green in The World of Musical Comedy refers to “Show Boat[’s] shatter[ing] too many musical comedy conventions and taboos” (59). Joseph P. Swain in The Broadway Musical asserts “Show Boat is the first American musical that integrates the elements of a musical theater into a credible drama” (18). Richard Kislán in The Musical states of Show Boat “The prototype for the serious modern musical had arrived” (121).

The result of early debate in identifying the first concept musical and determining how the category originated reveals one significant attribute on which several musical theatre scholars agree: the concept musical emphasizes theme over story.

### *The Fragmented Musical*

Due to the lack of agreement on a cohesive definition for the concept musical and a multiplicity of theatrical meanings for the term “concept,” both John Bush Jones and Joseph Swain attempt to rename the category. In Our Musicals, Ourselves Jones proposes that the various definitions of “concept” render “the notion of ‘concept musical’ . . . too broad to be of much value,” and he renames the category the “fragmented musical” (270). As Jones begins to work toward a more useable, concise definition he addresses the confusion the term “concept musical” often creates:

Fragmented musicals comprise a large block of genre often referred to in musical theatre discourse as the “non-plot musical” or the “concept musical.” The latter term, however, is problematic because of its non-descriptive quality. One would like to think that every musical worth mounting arose from its writers’ and directors’ concept. By definition, a theatrical concept is whatever gives unity, clarity, and vision to a production. (270)

Jones is correct in citing the “non-descriptive quality” of the category and he uses the term “theatrical concept” instead of “production concept,” but the heart of the problem he addresses is the continuing confusion between “production concept” and “concept musical.” Jones makes a strong case for the need to clarify the category, but instead of providing clarity, Jones uses the confusion in terms to justify renaming the category.

The primary reason Jones chose the term “fragmented” becomes clear as he discusses the society of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s in Our Musicals, Ourselves. During this time period, he proposes that a societal shift occurred which was mirrored in certain musicals of the time:

Thus the Me Generation evolved from what had begun as healthy, perhaps necessary introspection; but among many, this inward-turning became a kind of hedonistic narcissism. Fragmented musicals spoke directly to this self-absorption by depicting characters either asking “Who am I?” or alternatively, proclaiming their self-worth. In both the self-

questioning and self-proclaiming, it's the feelings of the individual *as* an individual that matter. (Jones 272)

Jones's decision to call the category the "fragmented musical," reflects not only the musical's structure, but also the structure of the society producing these works (271). For Jones, therefore, the fragmented musical is the direct result of society. The lack of a central storyline and the non-linear movement of the action represent contemporary society to Jones, an individualized process each character experiences that is in service to the overriding theme of the musical.

Stanley Vincent Longman, a theatre professor, addresses postmodernism in theatre in Page and Stage (2004):

. . . postmodern plays tend to splinter the action and focus, to throw things into juxtaposition without imposing a governing framework that implies meaning. Meaning is highly individual, and the post-modern playwright compiles a series of provocative scenes and images to play on the imagination and sensitivity of individual audience members. Plays tend to be highly reflexive, constantly calling attention to their stage devices. . . . (102)

Longman's description of postmodernism in theatre aptly describes the use of situation rather than story in the concept musical. This "series of provocative scenes" is used beyond the decade that Jones designates, and can be seen in twentieth century musical theatre such as Company and A Chorus Line.

While Jones proposes one of the more inclusive definitions of the concept musical, his focus on the aspect of fragmentation relegates the concept musical as a product of a limited time period. Company and other concept musicals are more than a reflection of the era in which they were written. Jones's assertion that a fragmented society gave rise to the fragmented musical is interesting and somewhat valid, but the concept musical cannot be confined to a decade as musicals in this style are still being created. The concept musical possesses qualities that are not bound by time and the defining attributes of structure, theme, and character speak to a category rather than an historical distinction.

Jones also sees the similarity between the category of revue and the fragmented musical but makes a clear distinction between the two:

. . . a key feature of fragmented musicals is the centrality of character, not story—hence the term “non-plot musicals,” which emerged to describe them. . . The way these processes are organized is the final defining element of the fragmented musical. The usual linear progression of incidents logically and dramatically strung together as a coherent story is replaced by what may appear to the viewer as a series of seemingly . . . haphazardly ordered songs, dance numbers, monologues, dialogue scenes, and visual images and effects, each of which exists to convey an aspect of the musical’s central theme.  
(272)

In his contrast between concept musical and revue, Jones reveals a previously unmentioned aspect of the concept musical, character. For Jones, the focus on character rather than story ultimately distinguishes fragmented musicals from revues. While revues focus on providing material to showcase a performer, fragmented musicals contain characters created by the writers to relate aspects of the theme through a series of situations that do not resolve in a traditional climax, as opposed to story like their integrated counterparts.

Aspects, or fragments, of the characters are also revealed through structure. Jones’s assessment of the concept musical’s structure is significantly more detailed than the definitions provided by Kislán, Citron, or Kantor and Maslon. In the fragmented musical, the arrangement of situations appears haphazard, as if parts of the musical could be interchanged or rearranged without destroying the overall integrity. Each fragment reveals not only a different facet of the characters, but also of the thematic issues. Jones’s inclusion of situation as an attribute of the fragmented musical gives coherence to the use of non-linear story. In order for the loosely associated situations to have meaning, there must be a theme tying the disparate parts together. Jones’s clarification of the interaction of theme, non-linear story, and character provide a clearer delineation of the concept musical parameters. The centrality of theme is also an important part of Jones’s definition and finds support in the scholarship of Kislán as well as Kantor and Maslon. For Jones, all fragments work toward the embodiment of the theme.

### *The Frame Musical*

Joseph Swain in The Broadway Musical (2002) follows Jones's lead by focusing on the attribute of situation, the individual stories comprising a concept musical, and puts forward the term "frame musical." Concentrating on the method used to tell the story, Swain compares the structures of Company and A Chorus Line to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, where the frame of the journey is used to showcase the stories of the travelers. Taking into account the unique structure of the concept musical, Swain concentrates on this element almost to the exclusion of others. For Swain, the frame musical uses a framing situation, such as A Chorus Line's audition for a Broadway musical or Company's series of birthday parties, to showcase the characters' stories.

Swain's decision to use the term "frame musical" occurred as he analyzed A Chorus Line. Prior to the 1970's the majority of musicals took their ideas from novels or previously staged works. Even Company was based on George Furth's original non-musical one-act plays, although they were changed significantly in the process of creating the musical. A Chorus Line, however, had no extant source apart from dancers' conversations recorded by Michael Bennett. In order to retain the tone of the taped sessions, Bennett utilized a frame setting, an audition for chorus dancers, to provide motivation for the stories shared. Swain further describes the structure of a frame story:

Indeed, the dramatic structure of a frame story emphasizes the low-level events, that is, the individual stories, at the expense of overall plot. The frame story sacrifices high-level tension and resolution, and puts in its place a series of small dramas, little waves of tension and resolution.  
(336)

Instead of focusing on one over-arching story, the frame story allows a musical to focus on several stories, or situations utilizing an overarching situation whose only function is to provide a reason for the characters to be present. An interesting aspect of the frame story as outlined by Swain is the ability to rearrange the events without sacrificing meaning:

But the various autobiographies in *A Chorus Line* could be altered significantly, have their order of presentation changed, or be replaced by new ones without the slightest effect on the show as a whole. That is because the high-level plot, the competitive audition, the excuse, is divorced from the low-level



events which fill up the stage time. (336)

The frame provides the reason for presenting the individual stories, but those stories are ultimately more important than the frame surrounding them because Zach's casting is not the climax. In fact, the final casting (the eight who would be in the unnamed musical) was not set in the script until one week after A Chorus Line was in preview performances. Up to that point, the actor playing Zach would select performers he felt had done well that night (Viagas et al. 239). While the framing situation is of interest to the audience, it is not the focus of the musical.

While Swain's definition for the frame musical highlights several of the attributes of the concept musical, there are significant differences between the definitions. Swain's focus on the framing situation as the organizing structure instead of theme suggests a lack of need for the sequence of events. Dominance of theme does not allow for random ordering of situation. To arbitrarily change the order of the situations undermines the musical's theme, negating Swain's assertion that frame and concept musical are interchangeable terms to designate the category as frame musicals can be rearranged without having an impact on the meaning. As integrated musicals suffer noticeably from cutting songs, dances, or dialogue, concept musicals also suffer if reorganized. For example, in A Chorus Line, placing the character Paul's monologue concerning his homosexuality and his apprehension regarding familial acceptance earlier in the musical would negate the impact this scene has on the audience. Sympathy for the character is built through the monologue and Paul's injury closely following his monologue immediately creates greater dramatic tension. Moving Paul's monologue too far away from the moment he falls lessens the audience's concern for the most sympathetic character in the musical.

Swain's conclusion that certain works such as Cabaret, Company, and A Chorus Line should be considered frame musicals because of their structural differences from integrated musicals like Oklahoma!, My Fair Lady (1956), and Hello, Dolly! (1964), is too simplistic. A concept musical is more than a musical containing a framing circumstance. While A Chorus Line possesses a strong frame, the audition process, Zach's casting is not the focus of the musical. Company, recognized as a concept musical, does not contain an apparent over arching situation to create a frame for the

vignettes presented. Instead, Company's birthday party frame is subtle, allowing the thematic issues to take precedence. In order for Swain's assertion to hold, the frame must be the primary attribute of the musical; however, although these musicals contain framing circumstances, the thematic issues are more important than the framing device.

Both Jones and Swain make important contributions, furthering the clarification of the concept musical category more thoroughly than their predecessors. Jones's focus on the symbiotic relationship of theme, structure and character is important in defining the category, while Swain establishes the significance of using situation, or low-level events that never resolve in a climatic scene as a viable way of structuring a musical. Yet, their definitions fall short and their attempts to rename the category have failed to be incorporated into the vocabulary by musical theatre scholars because both have limited rather than expanded the definition.

Retaining the term "concept musical" instead of focusing on "fragmentation" or "framing," as the designation for the category is expedient, since that is the term commonly used by musical theatre writers, producers, and scholars when referencing this category. Although the term may not adequately express the category, it does refer to the thematic concerns addressed by the musicals found in the category. Through analysis of existing definitions and identification of the primary attributes, a more concise definition of the concept musical is attainable

## Chapter 4: The Concept Musical Attributes: Function and Application

The analysis of existing definitions for the concept musical identifies the following distinguishing attributes: theme, structure, character, and song. Basing the definition for the category on the function of these attributes, the concept musical may be defined as:

A concept musical possesses non-linear structure, utilizes situations unified by theme, and employs the characters and songs to comment on the specific thematic issue(s).

To test the validity of this definition, the four attributes of theme, structure, character, and song will be discussed separately and applied to the two musicals commonly included in the category with no dissension: Company and A Chorus Line. These traits will then be applied to Pippin, Cats, and Avenue Q, three musicals often referred to as concept musicals, to demonstrate the sufficiency of the definition proposed in this thesis.

### *Theme*

The attribute of theme must provide the unifying force that shapes the concept musical and is the primary distinction separating it from the other three musical theatre categories. In musical comedy there is *no* theme. The revue *uses* a theme to unify disparate musical numbers and specialty acts. The integrated musical *contains* a theme. In contrast, the concept musical *embodies* a theme developed as the musical is written. Stephen Citron, in Sondheim and Lloyd-Webber: The New Musical, states the concept musical is “. . . a show written around a theme” (41). Kislán notes that in a concept musical “. . . all the elements of a musical show are made to embody an idea . . . question[ing] the need for story altogether” (179). The theme in the concept musical becomes the focus rather than plot. Therefore, a linear storyline is not needed to express the issues as the theme itself becomes the recognizable point of interest. Kantor and Maslon identified the centrality of theme in the concept musical:

With the concept musical, the touchstone [as opposed to the integrated musical’s story] would become something larger than the characters or the story, it was the theme of the show made manifest in a physical or theatrical way. (314)

Organizing a musical around a theme that can be separated into multiple issues or thematic points for exploration allows the creator(s) to comment upon questions that would be difficult to address in a linear story format. Both Company and A Chorus Line exhibit this characteristic.

Company<sup>2</sup> is based on seven original one-act plays about marriage written by George Furth. In an effort to make these plays a cohesive unit, director Harold Prince asked Stephen Sondheim to contribute music and lyrics. The contribution from Prince during the creation of the musical supports the understanding that the concept of the musical is written into the work, not added later as a director's concept. As Citron notes, Prince came to the project "hoping to do a musical about contemporary marriage. He wanted to explore attitudes toward wedlock, the influence living in cities had on the desire to get married. . . "(161). Like Prince, Sondheim also focused on theme during the musical's creation calling Company "the total possibility and impossibility of relationships. . . (Hirsch 86). The issue of disparate marital relationships is readily observed in Company as Hirsch further notes in his discussion of the theme:

Furth shows little compassion for his troubled people trapped in relationships they do and do not want. A bachelor observes the marital bad manners of five couples who represent a cross-section of upper-middle-class Manhattan mores circa 1970. . . . (87)

Company's focus on theme predominates any storyline the musical possesses. The couples are scrutinized and shown in both positive and negative situations. In order for the musical to remain somewhat neutral on the subject of marriage, Robert, a character outside all the relationships, was introduced to the marital jungle.

Prince and Sondheim created the character of Robert, the bachelor through whose eyes the audience examines marriage. The marriage theme creates questions for Robert and gives coherence to the issues addressed in the events that follow: Are Robert's married friends happier because they are married? Is there something wrong with Robert's life because he is not? Does Robert need to be in a relationship in order to truly experience life? To answer these questions, or at least to allow Robert to draw his own conclusions, various stages in dating and marital relationships are represented. Robert,

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<sup>2</sup> Appendix 1 contains a breakdown of Company's situations.

single with multiple relationships (April, Kathy, and Marta), is contrasted to Amy and Paul who represent the next step in a relationship, impending marriage. Sarah and Harry pretend wedded bliss through their passive-aggressive sniping, while Peter and Susan, a seemingly perfect couple, are happily getting divorced so they can remain together. Joanne and Larry represent an older couple, thoroughly in love even though Joanne would never admit it. Since Robert is the focal point of the play and is single, the various situations resolve into his search, not for a woman or a relationship, but for the reason why he should want to be in a relationship at all. The relationships and the issues they present are the primary focus instead of the characters or their stories.

The centrality of theme in the concept musical is evidenced by the most often asked question concerning Company: Is Company for or against marriage? (Hirsch 87). Since the purpose of a concept musical is not to sway the audience to one point of view, conflicting views of the theme are presented, encouraging audience members to form their own conclusions. Prince's answer to the question of Company's stance as for or against marriage is ambivalent. As Prince told George Abbott, he could "take his choice" of whether Company encouraged marriage or not (87). Sondheim echoed Prince's belief of the need for ambiguity in exploration of thematic issues:

. . . in a mechanized society; audiences mistook our saying that marriage and relationships are *difficult* for relationships are *impossible*. . . No show is about only one thing. . . On Company we all had a different idea but we agreed on tone and why we were writing it. (Zadan 104)

The five couples repel and intrigue Robert and the audience as they expose the tensions, problems, and questions in their marital relationships. Citron acknowledges the ambiguous representations of marriage in Company:

Of course the concept in large terms would be seen to be marriage. But beyond its construction, taken in even more essential terms, Company's concept deals heavily with ambivalence. (163)

With Robert's choice concerning his relationships and future marital status remaining unanswered at the end of the musical, the audience, like the characters in Company, must interpret the message intimated by Robert's failure to show up at the birthday party in the final scene.

While marriage provides the thematic anchor for Company, dance is the focus of A Chorus Line as it explores the characters' passion for dance and need for acceptance. Conceived, choreographed and directed by Michael Bennett, A Chorus Line was created through a workshop process. The goal for Bennett was "to present a show that captured the experience of dancers on Broadway, not in starring roles, but as everyday chorus dancers, as 'gypsies'" (Swain 334). Three original cast members, Robert Viagas, Baayork Lee, and Thommie Walsh,<sup>3</sup> elaborate on this conceptual vision in On the Line: The Creation of A Chorus Line:

A lot of people think A Chorus Line is about "kids" trying to break into show business. That's misconception number one. A Chorus Line is about Broadway dancers who have *been there*, and want more than anything to be there again and again, as long as they can. (24)

A Chorus Line was created from taped interviews and conversations with Broadway dancers during a series of workshops hosted by Michael Bennett. Some of the stories shared and included in the musical are lighthearted reminiscences while others are weighty intimate reflections, yet all focus on issues surrounding the dancers' lives and livelihood. The audition premise creates a natural milieu for discussing dance and exploring related issues while creating unity for the stories related by a group of dancers with varied backgrounds and aspirations. As the recorded conversations were turned into dialogue and song for the musical, questions concerning conformity and acceptance expressed by each dancer emerged. Ultimately, the dancers, Bennett, and his collaborators created a musical celebrating dance and the chorus dancer's role on Broadway.

For a concept musical to be successful, the theme must be one with which the audience can identify. Traditionally, musical theatre focuses on romantic relationships to provide audience identification. However, Viagas et al. acknowledge the audience's embracing of not just the musical A Chorus Line, but also the theme of dance:

The musical's great strength is the way it gets inside the private and emotion-fraught world of professional dancers, and makes their lives universal. (Viagas et al. 20)

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<sup>3</sup> "The entire original cast" also receives authorial credit on the cover.

Patricia Garland, an original cast member who contributed to the interviews that became A Chorus Line, comments on the ability of audience members to identify with the issues presented. In the musical, the casting of the chorus line means acceptance for only the successful eight of the sixteen who audition. Can audiences identify with this theme of acceptance?

A Chorus Line “has a common thread for people,” said Garland who created the role of Judy. “Even though we’re different in appearance, shapes, sizes, we all need and want the same things. Chorus Line allowed you to feel human lives, in a situation where they all had the same need. Everybody can put themselves on the line. Everybody in life has to audition no matter what it’s for.” (Viagas et al. 20)

If, as Garland asserts, various life situations can be compared to an audition, audiences will identify with the acceptance theme, applying it to their own circumstances.

Director Michael Bennett visually establishes the thematic questions in A Chorus Line through the bare stage and the dividing line drawn down the middle parallel to the footlights. The emptiness of the stage provides nothing to detract from the dancers, and the demarcating “line” is the defining metaphor for the musical. Several titles were considered (Dancers, Dancing, Backstage, Step by Step) but none embodied the theme as aptly as the image of the line, which contains a multiplicity of connotations for the musical. The musical begins with hopeful dancers on the line and ends with a celebration of the dancers in the line for the finale. Viagas et al. refer to the importance of the line as A Chorus Line became the fifth winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama:

Those others [the first four recipients] got the award for capturing the essence of some corner of the American experience, whether politics, racism, or business. A Chorus Line was about entertainment. It also touched on each of those other things. Perhaps even more important it was about putting yourself on the line and striving to be your best, or put less idealistically, to beat the next guy in the name of something beautiful. (300)

A Chorus Line’s central theme of dance with the issues of acceptance into the world of dance and conformity to the line moves into a celebration not only of dance but also what it means to be considered a professional dancer. Denny Flinn and Martha Swope in What They Did For Love explain the communal world of the dancer:

They stand next to one another in class at the barre,  
in lineups before leering producers, and behind the stars.  
They sweat together, party together, laugh and cry together,  
love and hate one another. They blend their voices in song  
and their bodies in dance. They are an insular group, with  
their own language and customs. As a subculture, they are  
virtually unknown to audiences, who, when cheering a  
musical, rarely see the chorus boys and girls as individuals.  
(Flinn et al. 9)

To create a musical about chorus dancers is to create a musical celebrating dance and the need to continue dancing for as long as possible. The character Cassie expresses this sentiment in “The Music and the Mirror”:

GIVE ME SOMEBODY TO DANCE WITH.  
GIVE ME A PLACE TO FIT IN.  
...  
ALL I EVER NEEDED WAS THE MUSIC, AND THE  
MIRROR,  
AND THE CHANCE TO DANCE. . . . (Kirkwood et al. 96)

The collective passion for dance culminates in “What I Did For Love,” the ensemble’s answer to the question: “But if today were the day you had to stop dancing. How would you feel?” (135). The chorus dancers do not seek the spotlight for themselves. Their desire is to continue performing as dancers for as long as they are able.

The finale, “One,” moves from rehearsal number to the climax of A Chorus Line, answering the larger question: Will this group of individual dancers conform to the line and the dance take shape? The dancers, who have come to be viewed as individuals through the majority of the musical, are now dressed in identical costumes and dancing precision choreography. Literally, the song “One” does not refer to the collective identity of the dancers, but to one unseen star where the song celebrates that star rather than the dancers in the chorus line. In the finale, the dancers are once again non-entities singing a paean to someone else. However, as McMillin notes, the real climax occurs “when ‘One’ comes across as a dance number and the chorus line, which is supposed to support a star, finds itself in the limelight—it is the star” (118).

The unifying themes in both Company and A Chorus Line provide a focal point for the audience, moving the emphasis away from a traditional linear plot in order to enable the theme to become the most important organizational element as the issues



raised are addressed in each situation. Through domination of theme, concept musicals and certain integrated musicals move beyond the original light entertainment popular in the late nineteenth century toward an art form which can be used by the writers to make political and social statements that remain palatable to the general public because of the medium through which they are presented.

### *Structure*

Structure provides the most visible demarcation for each of the four musical theatre categories. Ethan Mordden in One More Kiss refers to the concept musical as “. . . a presentational rather than strictly narrative work that employs out-of-story elements . . . to defy unities of time, place, and action” (127). Additionally, Lehman Engel, a Broadway musical director, refers to the concept musical in Musical Theater as “a mosaic of tiny plots” (55), while Glenn Litton, a musical theatre historian, describes it as “a collage of loosely related vignettes” in Musical Comedy in America (289). Sondheim refers to Company’s series of vignettes and songs portraying relationships as “non-linear” (Swain 337). Whether or not the particular concept musical possesses a linear through-line or not, the progression of the story or framing device is not the focus. This agreement concerning the structure of the concept musical highlights the use of independent stories, situations, or vignettes to present the various aspects of the thematic issues. Yet there is unity in the concept musical as it employs cause and effect for cohesion. The concept musical, which does not necessarily contain a beginning, middle, or conclusive ending brings a kind of circular organization to a progression of situations. Stanley Vincent Longman in Page and Stage describes circular structure as:

. . . hav[ing] some kinship with montage, [a structure deliberately contrasting events rather than moving from cause to effect] but rather than depending on juxtaposition for effect it depends on rounding the experience through a spirit of discovery that lead into various avenues. Circular structure has the tendency to work more through parallelism and association rather than through contrast in linking one event to another. (89)

Even though Longman is referencing non-musical drama in his discussion, the concept musical's juxtaposition of the situations to illuminate thematic points fully develops the topics and indeed "rounds the experience through a spirit of discovery."

In Company, Furth's plays became separate situations presented through dialogue and song with the metaphor of marriage holding them together. Sondheim recognized the challenge of creating a musical without a traditional plot during the early collaboration on Company:

A lot of the controversy about Company was that up until Company most musicals, if not all musicals, had plots. In fact, up until Company, I thought that musicals had to have very strong plots. One of the things that fascinated me about the challenge of the show was to see if a musical could be done without one. (Zadan 124)

The need for a structuring device was recognized and Robert's thirty-fifth birthday party became the frame opening and closing each act. The frame not only contains the situations, creating a starting and stopping point for the action, but also emphasizes them, developing the "parallelism and association" (Longman 89) of the circular structure. The resulting structure adheres to the elements of postmodernism which eschews coherence and closure in favor of fragmentation and non-traditional methods of narration. Prince was no longer bound by linear structure:

Freed from realistic clutter and from maintaining an illusion of real space and time, Prince could give Company the kind of swift tempo. . . that is thematically appropriate to New York neurotics who use constant movement as a way to avoid looking within. (Hirsch 91)

Similarly, as Sondheim composed the music, he treated "each song as an episode" (Citron 162). The ten separate vignettes in Company are presented in two acts, and the four versions of Robert's thirty-fifth birthday, used to bookend each act, change based on Robert's discoveries during the intervening scenes. John Bush Jones, in Our Musicals, Ourselves quotes a letter in which Sondheim discusses his shared belief with Harold Prince that the four versions of Robert's birthday party constitute one party:

"We always intended the birthdays in Company to be one surreal party. The play really takes place in the mind of the protagonist in a moment in time when he returns to his apartment on his birthday." (276)

As Jones observes, “The birthday party is thus a perfect structure-plus-metaphor for containing the theme of Company” (276). Without the frame of the party, there is neither a clear beginning nor a movement toward an end as each event blends into the next as “random, nonsequential thoughts” in Robert’s head (276). The frame does not provide the linearity found in an integrated musical, but it does create a reason and a means for Robert to explore his friends’ relationships and investigate why relationships might be important. Without looking at the various relationships in Robert’s life, there would be no move toward his final conclusion, however inconclusive it actually is.

The title song of Company foreshadows the manner in which the musical will unfold and prepares the audience for the disordered sequence of events. Prince outlined to Sondheim in an early meeting the type of structure for the musical he wanted and how it could be embodied in the opening number “Company”:

. . . introduce the various styles of the show, the way we are going to cut back and forth; also I would like to introduce the main character and include all the other characters . . . . (Citron 164)

Even though Sondheim expressed doubts concerning his ability to write such a song, “Company” begins with a whirlwind of activity where each character is introduced, inviting Robert over and making future plans. The song’s frenetic pace is indicative of the musical’s structure and the multiple scenes to come depicting Robert’s fragmented observations of his friends’ relationships. Beginning with the song “Company” the contradiction and paradox within and between the songs of the musical builds. Gerald Berkowitz in his article, “The Metaphor of Paradox in Sondheim’s Company,” states:

Contradiction is part of the basic method of the play, as well as its message; virtually every musical number is built on internal contradictions—within the lyrics, between lyrics and music, between the song and the dramatic situation, between the song and the convention in which it is written or between the singer’s intention and what actually comes out. This unbroken pattern in Company’s musical half makes paradox and contradiction the controlling metaphor of the play. (Berkowitz 95)

The song “Sorry, Grateful” is perhaps the best example of embracing this paradox in the musical. In answer to the question, “Harry? You ever sorry you got married?,” Harry sings:

You're always sorry,  
You're always grateful,  
You're always wondering what might have been.  
(Sondheim et al. 35)

Working through the contradictions and paradox presented in Company, the circular structure brings cohesion to the separate situations.

In contrast, A Chorus Line's use of the audition process provides a more realistic framing situation than Company's birthday party. Performed in one act, A Chorus Line contains a beginning, middle, and end corresponding to the audition process. Although the result of the audition provides a somewhat climactic moment, the primary focus of the musical is the dancers' stories. Harold Clurman notes the prominence of the individual stories over the story of the audition: "There is hardly any 'story' except for the stories of the young people on the line" (Swain 337). In this way A Chorus Line is in keeping with the literary tradition of the frame story, like those found in The Canterbury Tales as mentioned previously. Within the frame of the audition process, the necessary impetus is provided for the characters to recount their reasons for dancing and thus tell their stories, a series of seemingly unrelated situations. Swain comments on the coherence provided by the frame of the audition process:

The conception of A Chorus Line as a frame story enabled Bennett and his writers to preserve the individuality and honesty of the original autobiographies without having to weave them into some plausible plot line . . . its stories are neither episodes of a high-level plot nor subplots which abound in more traditional musicals as a means of articulating the main action. (136)

In this way, the frame becomes a vehicle for relating and containing the various stories.

As noted in the previous discussion of the "frame musical," the concept musical's structure is not confined to the framing situation. Swain notes the limitations of the frame musical when he states: "Perhaps the greatest difficulty of the frame story is closing it in a way that brings the stories together in some sort of artistic whole . . ." (343). The final situations and closing two songs of A Chorus Line do not bring closure to the dancers' stories since the ending is "inconsistent with the dramatic premise and . . . the frame story" (343). Therefore, defining A Chorus Line only in terms of the frame musical does not adequately clarify the attribute of structure. The artistic whole of A

Chorus Line is not found in the framing situation of the dancers' stories, but in the concomitant telling of the stories. As McMillin observes, ". . . the stories of these two dozen characters are told 'simultaneously'" (99), although there are moments, such as Cassie's song "The Music and The Mirror," where one dancer tells one story. An example of McMillin's "simultaneity" is found when the character Sheila begins the solo, "At the Ballet," which quickly becomes a trio. Mark's reverie in "Hello Twelve" becomes an ensemble number. "The show pauses over individual recollections but then turns the number into ensemble performance, and that is the dynamic that matters" (99).

The structure in A Chorus Line is ordered by the sequence of the situations which are controlled by Zach's puppet-master like presence, asking the dancers to share their stories and pressing for the real reasons they dance. Zach as director may control the order, but it is the dancers themselves who create the situations, breathing life into their accounts as their performances reveal their longings and connection to dance. The situations in A Chorus Line do move from less to more serious so that the later situations have greater impact. Unlike Company's arrangement of situation followed by song, A Chorus Line's songs and situations interweave as the dancers' stories overlap. This intertwining reflects the importance of the need to communicate through dance. When Michael Bennett, the director/choreographer, first asked dancers to be part of his project that became the musical, "A number of people turned him down. Some were afraid they might be called upon to assert themselves verbally, when their art and confidence lay in nonverbal communication" (Flinn 9). The dancers who refused felt their strength lay in the physical communication of dance rather than verbal storytelling; this reliance on the "nonverbal communication" necessitates the combining of song and dance in the situations.

In spite of the sequential orientation of the stories confined to the real time of the audition, the situations move beyond these limitations as memory overlaps with present reality through the stories, songs, and dances. Zach and Cassie's affair is in the past but becomes part of the present, the competition of the audition evaporates, even the real time drama of Paul's injury resolves into reflection on a career in dance. While childhood reminiscences are ever present ghosts on stage, the song "Hello Twelve, Hello Thirteen, Hello Love," exemplifies the movement between past and present from dancer to dancer.

Indeed, the musical relies so heavily on internal thoughts sung and shared by the performers that these brief musical interludes became known as “internals” to the original cast of the musical (Stevens and George xi). The overlaying of time and thought are clearly evident as characters step into the spotlight to tell their stories then fade back as another character’s turn begins. The circular structure results from the simultaneous telling of the stories, the juxtaposition of each presenting analogous parallels to be drawn by the audience. In addition, A Chorus Line depicts the circular structure of the dancer’s life. The dancers will continue to audition again and again, as the audition gives way to rehearsal, followed by the opening and finally the closing of the show.

### *Character*

In both musical comedy and the integrated musical, performers portray characters that fulfill a function of the plot. The concept musical and revue both lack the traditional plot found in the other two musical theatre categories that require the development of such characters. In Jones’s discussion of the fragmented musical, he makes a clear distinction between the “concept/fragmented” musical and the revue’s employment of character:

. . . a shred of plot or story exists [in the concept musical] but does not constitute the primary interest of the play as it does in most conventionally constructed musicals. But neither are these shows revues. Some of them, like revues, focus on a theme (marriage, dancing, work), but what differentiates the fragmented [concept] musical from the revue is *character*. The revue format of separate songs, dance numbers, and dialogue sketches is performed by performers who remain performers. Most fragmented musicals are peopled with named characters who have distinct personalities, backgrounds attitudes, aspirations, and agendas, all revealed through their individual processes of self-questioning and/or self-declaration. (272)

It is the named character who transforms the situations of the concept musical from an isolated performance to an event which, in circular structure, “depicts events seen from several points of view, events that strike a parallel to a previous one, or events presented as a series of stations in a journey of discovery. . .” (Longman 89). The utilization of character is a distinctive attribute since there is no linear storyline requiring development.

Instead, the characters and not the plot are central in developing the theme; conversely, characters are developed as they explore thematic issues. Both Company and A Chorus Line illustrate the concept musical's use of characters placed in various situations to transcend time and space in order to explore the thematic questions through the characters' eyes.

The opening song in Company introduces not only the characters (Robert, his three girlfriends, and the five couples) but also the style in which they will sing, with lyrics moving rapidly between the characters. This interchange among the characters is unique since within Company the characters do not "meet" in the conventional sense, but perform in alternate times and spaces on the same stage.<sup>4</sup> Robert, as the protagonist, provides the connection between the other characters and anchors the situations by considering the question, should I marry? In order for Robert to be able to consider this question, Harold Prince had to view Robert not as the narrator, but as the "lead character" (Hirsch 86). As Robert observes the complicated relationships of his friends, the resulting disjointed presentation mirrors life more than a carefully contrived linear story. Jones explained the ambivalence that the characters introduce through the disparate situations: "The dialogue scenes and musical numbers enact these random, non-sequential thoughts . . . the entire play taking place in Robert's head . . ." (Jones 276). In this way, each character is presented through song and dialogue. The situations explore various marital states, good and bad, as the characters encourage Robert to marry.

These situations provide the frame for each individual story to be told, culminating in Robert's conclusion concerning relationships. The frame of the birthday party provides a reason for the characters to be present and makes the depiction of their personal relationships primary. Company's characters embody the self-absorption noted in Jones' discussion depicting characters asking:

"Who am I?" or alternatively, proclaiming their self-worth.  
In both the self-questioning and self-proclaiming, it's the  
feelings of the individual *as* an individual that matter. (272)

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<sup>4</sup> In Our Musicals, Ourselves, Stephen Sondheim elucidates the unconventional interaction of the characters in Company: "We always intended the birthdays in *Company* to be one surreal party. The play really takes place in the mind of the protagonist. . . . Incidentally, this is why the characters don't know each other and are dressed for different occasions (e.g., Amy in her bridal costume)." (Jones 276)

All the characters focus their attention on Robert and his relationships, projecting onto him their own relationships and their search for answers. Robert's final decision is never quite clear to the audience or the other characters, since the point of the musical is not to create a happy ending for Robert by providing a perfect relationship. Rather, it is the exploration of various relationships through the characters and the impact those relationships have on the participants.

Unlike Company's presentation of several easily discernable characters from the start, A Chorus Line begins with the anonymity of dancers; these dancers become separate entities as each character is developed. The opening number, "I Hope I Get It," allows the audience its first glimpse of each dancer. Following this song and the elimination of several dancers, Zach, the director, asks the remaining dancers to talk about themselves, allowing each dancer/character to tell his or her story:

ZACH: Before we do any more dancing—(*Music under*) and we will be dancing some more—let me explain something. I'm looking for a strong dancing chorus. I need people that look terrific together—and that can work together as a group. But there are some small parts that have to be played by the dancers I hire. Now, I have your pictures and resumes, I know what shows you've been in—but that's not gonna help me. And I don't want to give you just a few lines to read. I think it would be better if I knew something about you—about your personalities. So, I'm going to ask you some questions. I want to hear you talk. Treat it like an interview. I don't want you to think you have to perform. I just want to hear you talk and be yourselves. And everybody just relax—as much as you can. (Kirkwood et al. 30)

From this point, each character becomes a distinct entity to the audience. Frank Rich, in the introduction to the libretto for A Chorus Line, comments on the shifting of focus to the individual dancers rather than the ensemble in the introduction to A Chorus Line:

In its text, A Chorus Line stands for the supremacy of the individual, for the right of even the lowliest member of an ensemble to have his own integrity and dreams.  
(xvii)

Through the telling of each dancer's story, the dancers are distinguished as individual characters to the audience rather than as an indistinguishable chorus line.



The reality based stories of A Chorus Line allowed the writers to present situations that “preserve the individuality and honesty of the original autobiographies” (Swain 336). Described as “a psychological striptease . . . [where] slowly the kids undress in a series of sad if funny vignettes” (335), the individual stories comprise a series of dramas containing “little waves of tension and resolution” (336) revealing the resilience of the dancers. In spite of the audition frame and the Zach/Cassie love interest, the real fascination of the musical is found in the situations where the dancers’ reveal “the inner drama of the show’s human personalities . . .” (Jones 287). At the end of the musical, few in the audience can recount the list of dancers who made the cut, but they do remember the individual stories. Other than the opening number, no subsequent situation in dialogue, song, or dance, highlights the audition; the focus is on each of the characters.

While each character’s story reveals different aspects of dance or specific reasons for pursuing a life in dance, the similarity of the dancers’ stories is demonstrated as solos become ensemble numbers. McMillin explains: “The show pauses over individual recollections but then turns the number into ensemble performance, and that is the dynamic that matters” (99). One of the more telling numbers, “At the Ballet,” allows three of the women (Sheila, Bebe, and Maggie) to share their search for acceptance, and their discovery of it, in ballet class. The three, from dysfunctional families, reveal psychological reasons for dancing: to escape troubled homes and to feel beautiful. As they sing, the emotional pain is deep while the words are contrastingly simple:

EVERYTHING WAS BEAUTIFUL AT THE BALLET,  
RAISE YOUR ARMS, AND SOMEONE’S ALWAYS  
THERE. (Kirkwood et al. 49)

Even though the three women recount different versions of abandonment, their feelings toward dance and their chosen profession are the same.

Without the dancers, there are no stories detailing the life of a professional dancer in A Chorus Line; similarly, without Robert, there is no viewpoint through which to explore relationships in Company. Robert’s reflections and the dancers’ auditions create the stories that form the basis for the musical. As has previously been stated, Company and A Chorus Line do not contain the traditional type of plot found in integrated musicals. However, both musicals still contain story. Through the characters, multiple

stories are related, each revealing a different aspect of the overriding theme. In this way, character and theme work together to create cohesion for the concept musical.

### *Song*

One attribute each musical theatre category shares is song. The manner in which song is utilized, however, creates the categorical difference. In The Musical as Drama, Scott McMillin describes two types of song used in musical theatre: out-of-the-blue and diegetic. According to McMillin, out-of-the-blue songs are the most common type found in musical comedies and integrated musicals, as they interrupt the spoken dialogue to convey intense emotion pertinent to the storyline in song. As McMillin notes:

. . . most songs in musicals are . . . not called for. Most songs in musicals seem to be happening for the first time, arising spontaneously from within the characters in the book . . . . When characters burst into song or dance the number seems to come from out of the blue. . . they are not called for as numbers by the book but are forms of spontaneous expression by the characters. (112)

Therefore, McMillin's out-of-the-blue songs fulfill the criteria of the integrated musical in that they provide an emotional and story-based continuation of the plot. His decision to term these songs "out-of-the-blue" perhaps stems from the fact that people do not burst into song and dance in real life. While spontaneous musical expression is pertinent to musical theatre, McMillin is correct in his nomenclature because these songs come from heightened emotion within the storyline, instead of being required because a character is a singer and must sing as part of the story. McMillin's description and usage of the term "out-of-the-blue song" is perhaps overly simplified, but it serves a purpose in recognizing a variety of song styles in musical theatre fulfilling a variety of functions within the libretto.

While the concept musical does contain out-of-the-blue songs, usage is rare. Instead, the diegetic song is more frequently used. This type of song differs from the out-of-the-blue number:

The term *diegetic*, borrowed from film criticism, is coming to be used for numbers that are called for by the book. It is meant to cover the backstage musicals plus any other occasions on which characters deliberately perform numbers

for other characters. . . . The diegetic number is not a case of someone “bursting into song.” Rather, someone has a song to sing, according to the book, and goes ahead and sings it. (103-104)

Therefore, song has a unique and significant function in the concept musical category. While musical comedy and revue use song to showcase performers and the integrated musical uses it to advance the plot, the concept musical utilizes song to illuminate aspects of the theme through self-reflective diegetic numbers, resulting in a commentary either on the action or on other characters. Although diegetic numbers are at times found in the other three categories of musical theatre, only the concept musical consistently utilizes the self-reflective aspect of diegetic songs. In addition the songs are used to provide further perspective, providing commentary and creating a situation in which characters demonstrate awareness that they are singing for an audience about their fellow characters or situations they observe.

The diegetic song is most frequently found in what McMillin terms “backstage” musicals,” which “are about putting on musicals” (102). As McMillin states, “not all diegetic numbers belong to the backstage convention, but all numbers from the backstage convention are diegetic” (103). In the “backstage convention” characters within the musical consciously perform a song for other characters who act as audience. Examples of this type of song include “Steam Heat” from The Pajama Game, a song performed by pajama factory workers at a union meeting attended by other workers, and the children’s performance of “So Long, Farewell” in The Sound of Music. In the songs mentioned, other characters are the primary audience of the performance and join the actual audience in watching the performance. While the backstage convention is not prevalent in the concept musical category, the use of the convention in A Chorus Line provides a rich demonstration of the use of diegetic song. The characters sing in order to tell the story as well as comment on the situation, creating awareness for both audience and character that the song takes place outside the situation.

Unlike the integrated musical, characters in concept musicals frequently perform diegetic songs about situations in which they do not participate. Stephen Sondheim addresses this quality in an assessment of Company’s songs:

All the songs had to be used, I'm sorry to say, in a Brechtian way as comment and counterpoint. . . We had our songs interrupt the story and sung mostly by people outside the scene.” In most of the songs the performers address the audience rather than each other and as a result the music usually stops the show, pulling us out of emotional involvement in a scene in order to provide a running, generally acerbic gloss on character and action. (Hirsch 89)

Referred to as self-reflective or self-reflexive,<sup>5</sup> the song allows the characters to be aware not only of themselves, but also of other characters and their actions, creating commentary on the action that deliberately interrupts the scene. Sondheim refers to these unique numbers as “‘inner monologue songs’ because characters sing their deepest, most personal thoughts to the audience but not to each other” (Kislan 161). Diegetic songs, therefore, are like the operatic aria, serving the function of a soliloquy. The self-reflective nature indicates the concept musical’s postmodern penchant for self-commentary.

In Company, the majority of the songs can be considered diegetic since they are called for by the book to comment on the action. The characters are aware that they are singing and are singing to the audience as opposed to each other. For example, “The Little Things You Do Together” is presented initially as Joanne’s solo and provides commentary on Harry and Sarah’s relationship:

JOANNE: It’s the little things you share together,  
Swear together,  
Wear together,  
That make perfect relationships.  
...  
The concerts you enjoy together,  
Neighbors you annoy together,  
Children you destroy together,  
That keep marriage intact. (Sondheim et al. 28)

As Harry and Sarah engage in a physical representation of their marital power struggle, the song provides a sarcastic view of marriage, detailing enjoyable aspects of marriage (“the little things you share together”) and then completely reversing the pleasures

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<sup>5</sup> Foster Hirsch, in Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre, attests that “[Sondheim and Prince] have become modernism’s answer to Rodgers and Hammerstein—the makers of the self-reflexive musical” (71).

(“Neighbors you annoy together/Children you destroy together”), presenting an alternative view of Sarah and Harry’s assertion that they are happy as their actions demonstrate otherwise. The song’s commentary reveals what Harry and Sarah cannot articulate in speech about their relationship.

Unlike the characters in an integrated musical, the other characters in Company are aware of Harry and Sarah’s antics, and present the couple’s underlying feelings in song. Concept musicals do not contain a traditional musical theatre chorus composed of anonymous performers. Instead, the choral songs are performed by the characters acting as chorus who witness each situation and are therefore able to provide commentary and reflection. An important aspect of this self-reflection is that characters do not comment upon their own feelings or actions; the commentary is carried out by characters not involved in the scene. The diegetic song, “You Could Drive A Person Crazy,” is an excellent example as it uses Robert’s three female companions, April, Kathy, and Marta, who are not part of the situation, as the chorus. Robert’s conversation with Jenny and David results in an assertion of his readiness for marriage:

ROBERT: I mean it when I say my life is totally prepared  
for a gigantic change right now. I am ready to be  
married. (Sondheim et al. 41)

The three women appear to sing their rebuttal of Robert’s claim:

KATHY, MARTA, & APRIL:

You could drive a person crazy,  
You could drive a person mad.

...

Then you leave a person dangling sadly  
Outside your door,  
Which it only makes a person gladly  
Want you even more.

...

But worse’n that,  
A person that  
Titillates a person and then leaves her flat  
Is crazy,  
He’s a troubled person,  
He’s a truly crazy person  
Himself! (42)

Having presented himself as a man who simply had not found the right woman, “You Could Drive a Person Crazy” presents a different picture: a man who leads women on, promises commitment, and fails to deliver. By following Robert’s bold statements during the scene with “You Could Drive a Person Crazy,” opposing representations of Robert are shown: a man actively seeking a relationship, and a man with an inability to commit. The spotlighting of these opposing sides of Robert demonstrates the effective use of the diegetic song in the concept musical.

Robert’s final decision results in “Being Alive,” a diegetic number occurring while his friends exhort him to be in a relationship. “Being Alive” was the third song written for Robert’s conclusion about marriage. The first song, “Marry Me A Little,” was moved earlier in the musical, reflecting Robert’s desire to maintain absolute individuality in a relationship. The second, “Happily Ever After,” is a reversal of the sentiments found in the third song, “Being Alive.” Foster Hirsch proposes that:

. . . Robert’s wish to escape from the threats of marriage, to fly free, is the manifesto of a misanthrope. Prince felt, correctly, that neither [song] offered an appropriate resolution, although both songs certainly reflect aspects of Robert’s character. . . . (87)

Unlike the first two songs, “Being Alive” hints that Robert actively makes a choice in favor of a relationship, providing a conclusion to Robert’s incessant search for a relationship. While “Marry Me A Little” presents Robert’s wish for a relationship containing the absolute minimum of commitment required, “Happily Ever After” provides a natural and understandable reaction to the primarily negative relationships he has observed. While this particular ending may not have found favor with the writers or critics, it provides a more logical conclusion to Robert’s experiences throughout the musical. The song addresses the various aspects of the relationships in a cry for human connection:

ROBERT: Somebody hold me too close,  
Somebody hurt me too deep,  
Somebody sit in my chair  
And ruin my sleep and make me aware  
Of being alive, being alive

. . .

Somebody force me to care,

Somebody let me come through,  
I'll always be there  
As frightened as you,  
To help us survive  
Being alive, being alive, being alive.  
(Sondheim et al. 116)

Robert has concluded he needs someone to force him to experience life instead of living vicariously through his friends. The result of his decision is not apparent in the musical, leaving questions as to whether or not Robert will act upon his decision to pursue a relationship or continue watching his friends.

With the extensive use of diegetic songs in A Chorus Line, the concept musical category's dependence on song is fully demonstrated. A Chorus Line's self-reflection proves to be subtler than that found in Company since the characters respond to Zach's question, "Tell me about yourself." Through their stories, the dancers comment on particular aspects of being a dancer that include self-doubt, apprehension, and the drive to be accepted. Each song performs the same function as dialogue and allows the characters to dance instead of simply discussing dance. Just as song becomes an outlet for uncontrollable emotion in the integrated musical, this particular concept musical treats dance in the same manner. Song and dialogue are intertwined; they are a means to dance.

While A Chorus Line falls into the "backstage musical" category, the songs are not diegetic solely because of this convention. As Zach places the dancers in groups for their audition, "I Hope I Get It" allows the dancers to express their inner thoughts and to comment on their experience:

ALL: GOD, I REALLY BLEW IT!  
I REALLY BLEW IT!  
HOW COULD I DO A THING LIKE THAT?  
...  
  
NOW I'LL NEVER MAKE IT!  
I'LL NEVER MAKE IT!  
HE DOESN'T LIKE THE WAY I LOOK.  
HE DOESN'T LIKE THE WAY I DANCE.  
HE DOESN'T LIKE THE WAY I . . . .  
(Kirkwood et al. 13)

This number focuses on the audition revealing the dancers' thoughts and allowing each one of them to comment directly on the individual's situation so that the audience will

fully comprehend the range of emotions. While “I Hope I Get It” is the only song to comment on the frame of the audition process, it sets the stage for the more self-reflective songs to follow.

The remaining twelve songs in A Chorus Line can be divided into two categories: memories and internals. The memory songs (“I Can Do That,” “At the Ballet,” “Hello Twelve, Hello Thirteen, Hello Love,” and “Nothing”) set the stage for the dancer to move to the spotlight and sing the story. Mike, through the song, “I Can Do That,” describes watching his sister in dance class:

MIKE: I’M WATCHING’ SIS  
GO PITTEPAT.  
SAID,  
“I CAN DO THAT,  
“I CAN DO THAT.”  
...

ONE MORNING SIS WON’T GO TO DANCE  
CLASS.  
I GRAB HER SHOES AND TIGHTS AND ALL  
...

I GOT TO CLASS AND HAD IT MADE  
...

ALL THANKS TO SIS  
(NOW MARRIED AND FAT),  
I CAN DO THIS.  
(DANCES)  
THAT I CAN DO!  
I CAN DO THAT. (33-34)

Mike’s lighthearted song provides a happy memory of dancing as a child, discovering his talent that resulted in his acceptance at the dance studio. While Mike’s experience, described in his song, reveals one reason for dancing, other characters in the musical began dancing for different reasons, and Mike’s easy acceptance in the dance world is unlike the stories told by the others. In contrast, the song “Nothing” represents the bitterness found in some of the dancers’ stories as the character Diana recounts the frustration of her early training. The same depth of expression is found in the internal songs (“Sing,” “Dance Ten, Looks Three,” “The Music and the Mirror,” and “What I Did for Love”). These are individual thoughts on acceptance, yet these thoughts are mirrored



in each dancer's story. Val in "Dance Ten, Looks Three" proclaims her self-worth and acceptance in dance through the miracle of silicone. Cassie presents a contrast in "The Music and the Mirror" revealing the confidence she possesses and the true passion for dance she feels despite the ups and downs of her career. The song "What I Did For Love," allows the cast a final reflection on another aspect of the themes as they explore how they would feel if they could no longer dance. The song is prompted by a question posed by Zach following Paul's injury and asks outright what the dancers would do if they could not dance:

ZACH: But if today were the day you had to stop dancing.  
How would you feel?  
ALL: KISS TODAY GOODBYE,  
AND POINT ME T'WARD TOMORROW.  
WE DID WHAT WE HAD TO DO.  
WON'T FORGET, CAN'T REGRET  
WHAT I DID FOR LOVE. (139)

As the dancers seamlessly move into the song, stating unequivocally their passion for dance, the concept musical's effective use of diegetic song is clearly illustrated.

The unique use of song in Company and A Chorus Line makes a clear distinction between the concept musical and other categories. Songs are used obviously to comment on subtext found in situations as well as to reveal additional thematic aspects. While the diegetic song can be used in all categories of musical theatre, the concept musical moves beyond the backstage convention, by creating diegetic songs that provide commentary and self-reflection of the situations and theme.

*Application: Pippin, Cats, and Avenue Q*

While it is apparent that the concise definition of a concept musical<sup>6</sup> can be applied to Company and A Chorus Line, it is important to demonstrate its applicability to musicals that are commonly regarded as concept musicals in order to test its validity. Pippin (1972), Cats (1982), and Avenue Q (2003) can be classified as concept musicals because their stories are presented through several distinct situations using characters and song to comment on theme. Applying the definition developed in this thesis to these

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<sup>6</sup> Musicals possessing non-linear structure utilizing situations unified by theme while employing the characters and songs to comment on the thematic issues.

concept musicals from three different decades supports the validity of the definition in addition to revealing that the concept musical is not strictly a product of the 1970's.

Pippin (1972) is the closest in time period to Company and was created by Stephen Schwartz (music and lyrics) with Roger O. Hirson and Bob Fosse (book). John Bush Jones places Pippin alongside Company and A Chorus Line in his "fragmented musical" category, assigning it to the same category as other concept musicals. Stanley Green also recognizes Pippin's categorization as a concept musical:

By gaining [Bob] Fosse, the show also gained a concept, that of a magic show. . . . In addition, Fosse conceived the idea of offering the story within the framework of a Commedia Dell'Arte performance. (361)

Like Jones, Green does not specifically call Pippin a concept musical, but his identification of a framework containing the episodic story reveals Pippin's place in the concept musical category.

Cats's creator and composer, Andrew Lloyd-Webber, had previously only written the scores for his musicals while collaborating with Tim Rice, his lyricist; however, Lloyd-Webber wanted the challenge of writing music for existing poetry. Lloyd-Webber selected T. S. Eliot's collection of poetry, Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats, since the poems contain strong rhythms and posed a compositional challenge. Eventually Tim Rice, Trevor Nunn, and Richard Stilgoe all contributed lyrics for some of Eliot's unfinished poems. Cats won multiple Tony Awards in 1983, including Best Musical, Best Score, and Best Book. Although scholars have not specifically stated that Cats belongs in the concept musical category, comments made and actions taken by the creative team imply that Cats fits into the category. Harold Prince relates his confusion about the content:

I listened to it all, and I said, "Andrew, is this something I don't get? Is this about Queen Victoria, she's the main cat, and Disraeli and Gladstone are other cats, and then there are these poor cats, and am I missing this?" He took a terrible, painful pause and said, "Hal, it's about cats." And we never discussed it again. (Kantor 381)

Director Trevor Nunn also sensed a difference in Cats from other musicals:

Nunn instinctively knew that the material needed to be shaped, that the disparate poems needed a through-line. Inspired by some stray lines of Eliot's poetry from another source, Nunn imagined the various brief cat biographies in Lloyd Webber's songs culminating in a nocturnal ceremony where one cat could be reborn into the next of its nine lives. (381)

The creation of Cats' overall story, made up of a variety of smaller stories, certainly makes a case for its placement in the category.

Avenue Q, which won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 2004, brings the concept musical into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Created by Jeff Marx and Bobby Lopez, Avenue Q is irreverent and funny, but also touches on various topics relevant to young adults. While like Cats it has not been referred to explicitly as a concept musical, Jeff Whitty, the librettist, in a conversation with Marx and Lopez, reveals their difficulty in categorizing Avenue Q:

**WHITTY:** I knew that I wanted it to be a story musical, and Bobby and Jeff had a different vision of it. They wanted something that didn't move like a story, but they'd say "not a revue."

**LOPEZ:** What we really meant was a hybrid king of revue-slash-show. Using kind of Internet logic. A hyperlink type of logic to go from one subject to another. (Pincus-Roth 19)

While they never call Avenue Q a concept musical, it is clear that they are attempting to describe what is commonly considered a concept musical.

Theme is the unifying element intentionally written into all three musicals in order to explore issues. Both Avenue Q and Pippin thematically focus on a coming of age search for meaning in life, a traditional quest for young adults. The search for purpose and identity leads Pippin through several situations as he tries his hand alternately at war, ruling the Holy Roman Empire, sex, and settling down with a single mother. Pippin concludes that he must "think about [his] life" more extensively before making a decision. In Avenue Q, Princeton, the main character, conducts a more staid search for purpose as he allows his quest to influence his relationships with Kate Monster and the other residents of Avenue Q. Princeton is ready to discover his life's purpose and the various situations he encounters are filtered through his search. Cats possesses themes of acceptance and forgiveness. Webber creates the premise of the Jellicle Ball

with cats vying to be the Jellicle Choice. The result is “cat” characters sharing stories that explore human nature and the ability to accept and forgive those who are shunned.

These three musicals, like Company and A Chorus Line, possess circular structure, utilizing separate situations and vignettes to explore the thematic questions. Pippin's frame, a traveling troupe of players, is established in the opening song, “Magic to Do.” Throughout the musical, which moves swiftly between several locations, the players portray the people in Pippin's life and encourage him to try different experiences. The picaresque wandering culminates with the players advising Pippin to end his life since he has found no purpose. The play ends as it began with Pippin still endeavoring to discover his purpose. Cats possesses a simpler frame; the cats have gathered in an alley to attend the Jellicle Ball and determine the Jellicle Choice who will be sent to the Heaviside Layer. As in A Chorus Line, each cat tells his or her story through song and dance creating separate situations that develop the audience's understanding of not only these cats and their world, but the human condition as well. The selection of Grizabella, the shunned cat, as the Jellicle Choice brings the musical to a conclusion, but the annual selection process will continue. Avenue Q's frame is found in Princeton's search which bookends each of the two acts, similar to the birthday parties in Company. Act One starts as Princeton begins his quest, but by the end of the act Princeton realizes he has become so involved with Kate that he has forgotten his search for purpose. Act Two opens to reveal Princeton's certainty that he will never discover his purpose. Finally, the musical ends as Princeton assists Kate in achieving her purpose. During the course of the musical, Princeton loses his job, falls in love, breaks up with the right girl to be with the wrong girl, and discovers the joy found through helping others. None of these activities bring him closer to discovering his purpose, indicating that the events of the musical will continue after the section shared with the audience is completed. Each of these concept musicals employs theme to hold the episodic situations together.

The characters in Pippin, Cats, and Avenue Q transform the various situations by commenting on the theme and giving unity to the structure. Company, Pippin and Avenue Q focus primarily on one character through whose eyes the various situations are viewed. Without Pippin, there is no reason for the group of players to present the various life choices. Princeton's search for purpose in Avenue Q provides insight to the stories of

the other characters residing in his apartment building. In contrast, the feline characters of Cats function in the same way as A Chorus Line's dancers. Each of Eliot's poems focus on a different cat, resulting in cat characters sharing stories that explore the themes. As in A Chorus Line, the cats sing and dance their stories, hoping to be chosen. Therefore, the characters in these three musicals create the reasons for the situations and develop the theme.

The crucial attribute of diegetic song is present in all three musicals. In Pippin, the songs range from didactically self-reflective, as Charlemagne teaches Pippin about war in "War Is a Science," to pure commentary, as in the Leading Player's "Glory" and "Simple Joys." Pippin's songs all provide self-reflection, even when they are performed as part of the situation. The songs in Cats are primarily diegetic because they are part of the backstage convention, with the other cats watching and sometimes participating in the songs. In Cats, each song provides commentary not only on the characters, but on the nature of humanity in general. Citron observes that as Stilgoe and Nunn worked on the opening song:

. . . they cobbled together a premise inspired by sections from Eliot's poems and lines of unpublished verse called "Pollicle Dogs and Jellicle Cats." The idea was to humanize the animals and establish the theory that cats behave a lot like humans. (272-273)

Songs are performed in the third person by the characters with the cat chorus adding commentary. These songs are self-reflective as the cats boast, reminisce, and perform. The diegetic songs used in Avenue Q are more like those found in A Chorus Line than Company as they relate memories and provide a place for internal examination. In the majority of the songs, each character shares thoughts usually kept to oneself, as in "Schadenfreude," "Everyone's A Little Bit Racist," and "The Internet is For Porn." The only number to comment on the action in the style of Company is "You Can Be As Loud As the Hell You Want (When You're Makin' Love)," as characters not involved in the scene discuss Kate and Princeton's activities. The songs in Pippin, Cats, and Avenue Q move beyond the storytelling found in integrated musicals and provide self-reflection and commentary, qualities associated with concept musicals.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Clearly defining the concept musical contributes significantly to the critical study of musical theatre by establishing a reference point for future discussion. As defined in this thesis, the concept musical possesses non-linear structure, utilizes situations unified by theme, and employs the characters and songs to comment on the specific thematic issue(s). By utilizing these four attributes common to all musicals in a unique way, the concept musical is distinctive from the musical comedy, revue, and the integrated musical. In the concept musical, the elements intertwine making separation difficult since the inter-reliance of the attributes defines the category, emphasizing theme over story while replacing a linear storyline with episodic situations that are circular in nature. Earlier dissension among musical theatre critics and scholars concerning which musicals belong to the concept musical category and the questioning of the category's existence necessitate the development of this clear definition that elucidates the function of the attributes while supporting the existence of the concept musical category as distinct. Disagreement over the appropriateness of the term "concept" as the designation becomes a secondary issue to the fact that the parameters of the category established in this thesis are clearly identifiable and promote analysis of musicals.

As the concept musical evolved in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, musical theatre critics and historians recognized the innovative trend of the concept musical. All agreed that Company and A Chorus Line were conceptual in nature, but agreement concerning a definition for the emerging category hampered appreciation of the significant impact the concept musical would have on musical theatre. While John Bush Jones and Joseph Swain's attempts to identify and rename the concept musical were not accepted, their work made fundamental contributions in identifying the primary attributes and functions of the elements in order to develop a concise definition for the concept musical. Examination of both Company and A Chorus Line in relation to the common musical elements reveals that in the concept musical:

- Theme is the unifying element rather than plot.
- Structure is based on independent situations or vignettes that present the theme(s), giving unity through a structuring device.

- Characters are developed as they explore the theme without the encumbrance of a linear storyline, free to move through time and space in their exploration making them central to the development of the theme.
- The theme is further explored through self-reflective diegetic songs that provide commentary.

The analysis of Pippin, Cats, and Avenue Q, three musicals currently placed in the concept musical category, verifies the applicability of the proposed definition and supports the validity of the category designation.

The understanding of musical theatre in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century is dependent on the ability to analyze the concept musical and its significant contribution to the evolution of the genre. The establishment of a precise definition for the concept musical will assist in making the entire musical theatre genre a legitimate avenue for scholarly inquiry. When lyrics are taken as text on parity with the book, the richness of the musical as literature is evident. The concept musical's use of diegetic song as outlined in this thesis demonstrates the need for inclusion of lyrics when studying the musical given that song in the concept musical provides commentary on the theme instead of simply advancing a storyline. To study current musical theatre and not consider the concept musical as a codified classification conveys an incomplete picture of American theatre.

The concept musical's initial defiance of clear classification attests to its unique qualities representing an amalgamation of the preceding categories of musical theatre, and its importance to the history and development of the musical theatre genre. Just as it is possible to trace the impact of various literary movements through the study of theatre, it will be possible to trace similar impact of literary movements on musical theatre when it is subjected to the same scrutiny. Musical theatre was altered as writers created conceptual musicals initiating overt social commentary by reformulating and reutilizing attributes of existing musical theatre categories. Employing the definition for the concept musical proposed in this thesis will provide scholars the needed terminology to explore further such transformations in American musical theatre and to follow its progression to new innovative forms. By analyzing musical theatre using the same methods that are

used in non-musical theatre analysis, scholars will be able to continue asserting musical theatre's legitimacy as a genre and its worth to the theatrical body of knowledge.

As an innovative form of musical theatre writing, the concept musical offers promise as an area of study by providing insight into the conventions of the entire musical theatre genre. The concept musical is an important category of musical theatre, just as musical theatre is an important genre of American theatre. Building the theory of musical theatre study is dependent on the consensus of scholars in their use of terminology when discussing the genre. Employing the definition for the concept musical developed in this thesis will fulfill McMillin's appeal in The Musical as Drama to develop "definable conventions around which one can think about the musical as a form of art" (x).



## **Appendix 1 Situation Sequence in Company**

Act 1:

Scene 1: Robert's apartment. His thirty-fifth birthday party.

Song: "Company" Introduces Robert and his friends.

Scene 2: Sarah and Harry's apartment. Passive-aggressive relationship bound by annoyances that keep the relationship going.

Song: "The Little Things You Do Together" Interspersed with a karate demonstration which is the physical representation for Sarah and Harry's relationship.

Song: "Sorry-Grateful" The conundrum that is marriage.

Scene 3: Peter and Susan's amicable divorce.

Scene 4: Jenny and David's den. Relationship built on desire to please.

Song: "You Could Drive a Person Crazy" Robert's girlfriends comment on his inability to commit.

Song: "Have I Got a Girl for You" Married friends try to help Robert find a woman to marry but Robert wants an amalgamation of his friends' wives.

Scene 5: Song: "Another Hundred People" Interspersed with scenes depicting the fast-paced, impersonal nature of relationships in New York.

Scene 6: Amy's wedding.

Song: "I'm Not Getting Married Today" Amy's nervous breakdown over her wedding.

Song: "Marry Me a Little" Robert wants to be married without the full commitment of the relationship.

Act 2:

Scene 1: Robert's apartment. He blows out the candles on his birthday cake and David asks if he wished for a wife.

Song: "Side By Side/What Would We Do Without You"

Scene 2: Robert invites April to his apartment.

Song: "Poor Baby" The wives comment on Robert's poor taste in women.

Song: "Barcelona" Robert asks April to stay but realizes he has made a mistake.

Scene 3: Robert and Marta visit Peter and Susan, now divorced but still happily living together for their children.

Scene 4: Larry and Joanne's club. Joanne, a cranky woman, pretends to despise her husband.

Song: "The Ladies Who Lunch" Joanne diatribe about a housewife's quiet desperation.

Song: "Being Alive" Robert declares that he wants a relationship that will make him live his life instead of watching his friends.

Scene 5: Robert's apartment. His friends wonder where he is, then leave. Robert has been watching, but chooses not to interact. He blows out the candles on his cake.

## **Appendix 2 Situation Sequence in A Chorus Line**

Song: “I Hope I Get It” Reveals dancers’ inner thoughts about the audition and sets the stage for personal stories to come when Zach, the director, asks the dancers to introduce themselves.

Song: “I Can Do That” Mike’s story about learning to dance.

Monologue: Bobby’s elaborate story about his life.

Song: “And” The dancers decide what they will say when called on.

Monologue: Sheila begins her story but is interrupted by Zach.

Song: “At the Ballet” Three stories of family alienation with identity being found in dance. Sheila used dance to escape family, BeBe danced to be beautiful, and after Maggie’s father left, she found acceptance in dance class.

Song: “Sing” Al and Kristine’s story, a married couple, reveals Kristine’s lack of singing talent.

Song: “Hello Twelve, Hello Thirteen, Hello Love” a montage in which various dancers share snippets of their adolescent lives when acceptance and identity are important.

Song: “Nothing” Diana’s story of life at the School for Performing Arts and the disappointment she suffered at the hands of a bad acting teacher.

Song: “Dance: Ten, Looks: Three” Val’s story of plastic surgery in order to improve her chances of being cast and accepted.

Dialogue: Break in the stories and audition. Paul has been silent up to this point. Zach notices and calls on him. Paul is reluctant to share and when the dancers ask for a break, he takes the opportunity to escape. Cassie stays behind to talk to Zach. He doesn't want her to be in the chorus; he wants her to be a star.

Song: "The Music and the Mirror" Cassie's desire to dance.

Dialogue: Zach dismisses Cassie and Paul is sent in.

Monologue: Paul's revealing life story detailing his difficulty in dealing with his homosexual identity and wanting acceptance which is given by his parents.

Dialogue: The dancers return. Zach forces Cassie to conform to the choreography. Paul hurts his knee and is taken to the hospital. Zach asks what the dancers will do when they can't dance anymore.

Song: "What I Did For Love" The dancers agree they don't care what will happen when they can no longer dance. The important thing is that dance has been a part of their life, a place where they are accepted, and a significant part of their identity.

Zach casts his performers.

Song: "One" Curtain call. Cast dressed identically, performing identical steps.

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